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ABSTRACT

The Rural Special Education Program (RSEP), a partnership between Northern Arizona University (NAU) and Kayenta Unified School District (KUSD), provides training for preservice special education teachers to work with Native American students and their families. To date, the program has provided training for 63 preservice special education teachers, of which approximately half are Native American and reside in Kayenta. Currently, there are 15 students in the RSEP; 9 students are Native Americans who work as paraprofessionals for KUSD, the other 6 students are non-Natives that have previously taken classes on the main campus of NAU. The program requires university students to live on the Navajo reservation and receive practical classroom experience in KUSD schools. Informal surveys and phone interviews were conducted with current and former RSEP participants regarding major challenges of the program, adaptations students made to overcome challenges, and suggestions for future RSEP students. Respondents stated that living conditions, distance from families and major cities, lack of entertainment, and adapting to cultural differences were the major challenges of the program. Students adapted by learning to get along and respect one another, being flexible, car-pooling and planning trips to metropolitan areas, taking advantage of entertainment available on the reservation, and accepting the culture on the reservation. Suggestions for future RSEP students include ensuring adequate finances for living away from campus, respecting both the Navajo people and the land, and taking advantage of learning from the Navajo culture. (Contains two references.) (LP)

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A RURAL SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHER TRAINING PROGRAM: SUCCESSFUL ADAPTATIONS

Introduction

Adapting to a new environment can be difficult. As current Rural Special Education Program (RSEP) participants we have found appropriate planning and preparation can make adapting to a rural community less stressful. Each individual adapts differently, and because some have more trouble adapting than others, this paper will focus on successful adaptation techniques from both current and former RSEP students. Informal surveys and interviews were used to gather the necessary information that will be discussed in this paper. This information may prove useful to public schools and rural areas interested in becoming involved in a field-based teacher preparation program. Those involved in higher education, who may be considering starting a partnership in a rural area, may also benefit from the information discussed in this paper.

Overview of RSEP

The RSEP is a partnership involving Northern Arizona University (NAU) and the Kayenta Unified School District (KUSD). The RSEP is funded by the Department of Education and is currently in it's fourth year. The funding has provided training for 63 pre-service special education teachers. Approximately one-half of the participants are Native American and reside in Kayenta. This project enables Native American participants to work and remain with their families, while obtaining special education certification. The grant provides for tuition, books, conferences, and the salary for the project manager. KUSD provides housing for the 'traditional' NAU students (students that typically live on campus) as well as the project manager (Prater, Kee, Holmes, Smiley, Skaates, & Kull, 1995).

Currently there are 15 students in the RSEP. Nine of the students are Native American (nontraditional students) who work as paraprofessionals for KUSD. The other six (traditional) students have previously taken classes on the main campus of NAU. The RSEP combines the two cultures by requiring the campus students to live in Kayenta for the duration of the program. This unique partnership is extremely beneficial to all who are involved. The Native American students benefit because they are able to receive their education through NAU without requiring them to move away from their homes and families. The traditional campus students are enriched by a different culture, and at the same time benefit from the experience and training offered by a field-based program. KUSD also benefits from this partnership. The program gives paraprofessionals who are currently working for the district the opportunity to further their education. According to the National Center for Education Statistics in 1986-87, only 134 or 4% of the Native Americans attending higher education received their associate degree, 452 or 11% received their bachelor's degree, and 376 or 34% received their master's degree in education (Lancaster, 1992). The RSEP helps fulfill the need for special education training among Native Americans.

During the school year all RSEP students will earn a total 37 special education credits. Students are required to attend NAU classes four nights a week. Most of the classes are taught by the on-site professor, who also serves as the project manager. One class is taught by Interactive Instructional

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Television. This class originates from the NAU main campus and is taught by a regular member of the special education faculty. During the day the Navajo students continue working as paraprofessionals for the school district. The traditional NAU students work in an assigned classroom within KUSD for four hours each day.

Method

Informal surveys and phone interviews were conducted and analyzed in order to receive information from current and former RSEP participants. The survey was designed to allow respondents to identify personal experiences which, in their opinion, helped them adapt to a rural environment. There were a total of fourteen Anglo students surveyed or interviewed, two being male and twelve being female.

The questionnaire used to collect our data consisted of the following questions:

1) Please list the major challenges you encountered as a result of participating in RSEP.
2) Please indicate the adaptations that you made in order to overcome the challenges.
3) What suggestions do you have for future RSEP students?

Results

After analyzing the responses to the informal surveys certain trends were noticed. In response to questions number one and two, many former and current RSEP participants said the areas in which they faced the most challenges were in the living conditions, distance from families and major cities, entertainment differences, and finally adapting to the culture. Challenges and adaptation strategy techniques are combined and discussed for each of these three areas. For each challenge suggested adaptations follow. The final question of the survey relates to suggestions for future RSEP students. These suggestions will be presented last.

Many of the former and current RSEP participants noted a need for adaptations in living situations and conditions. Several students noted difficulty living with people they did not know. Although this challenge was eliminated after spending some time together, it took a lot of hard work. One participant reflected on the challenge of sharing a kitchen with four "roomies." The four RSEP students worked together to be sure every one had adequate storage space, as well as cooking time. One participant addressed a challenge in "personality conflict" among roommates. This particular participant found that spending "time away from roommates" was a great way to "reduce stress."

Adapting to the living conditions can be different for each participant. This year two of the participants spent time and money in order to adapt. The apartments provided by KUSD were constructed in the early 1960's. During the windy season the bedrooms are very dry and dusty. Adapting, in this case, meant purchasing a vaporizer, as well as putting up plastic around vents and windows. One of the greatest lessons learned by many participants has been patience. Living in the apartments often means being patient. When a drain clogs, or the heater goes out, it may take a few days to a few weeks to receive the parts and fix the problem. Many of the participants said "be flexible!!"

Distance seems to be one of the main concerns in adapting to this particular rural area. As one of the former RSEP participants commented, "A major challenge was living in a small town and having to drive two to three hours to take care of business." Medical appointments posed another challenge. Another RSEP participant told a story about having a bladder infection, and needing to drive to Flagstaff on a Friday afternoon and then back to Kayenta that same day. The driving time alone took a total of five hours.

Other major adaptations in distance include: nearest cities for air travel, visits concerning personal

transportation, NAU visits (advisors, professors, administration and library visits), as well as distance from loved ones and friends. For instance, one student recalled leaving Kayenta at 6:15 a.m. one morning in order to arrive for a 9:30 a.m. library appointment at NAU. In order to make the appointment the student had to endure icy roads and snowy weather.

Although distance can be a major burden, students often work together to minimize the inconveniences. Some of the strategies used by former and current RSEP students are carpooling and planning. For example, one student said, "Budgeting time and money was the only way to survive on the reservation." As a result of their planning, they "could get everything done."

Entertainment was another area many respondents expressed the need for making adaptations. Kayenta is a small community within the reservation and is at least two hours from any type of metropolitan entertainment. The majority of the participants came from urban areas and found it difficult to adjust to the different types of entertainment one experiences in a small, isolated town. For instance, there are no shopping malls, coffee shops, bowling alleys, or favorite restaurants within Kayenta. Often times a 2 to 6 hour drive is necessary in order to participate in a favorite past time or type of entertainment one had become accustomed to in the past. One student replied:

> I have had the most difficulty in adapting to a new 'type' of entertainment. I have put thousands of miles on my car due to traveling to surrounding cities. I now realize that what used to be a necessity soon becomes something trivial. The movie theater is no longer right around the corner, nor is your favorite restaurant.

Most participants surveyed resorted to traveling long distances for a specific type of entertainment. Many students noted when spending time on the weekends in Kayenta, activities such as hiking, biking, reading, and sight-seeing, were favorites.

The most popular answer given for adapting for success was to be accepting of the culture. Many were thankful they had Navajo classmates because of the convenience, and the safe feeling they had when asking questions. As one former RSEP students stated, "I killed them with kindness until they accepted me." In addition to gaining an academic education, RSEP participants also gain a sensitivity to an unfamiliar culture. Moving from an urban area to the Navajo Reservation, members of the program gain an understanding of culture and societal differences. As former RSEP participants, we have sensitivity to the culture and a willingness to adapt.

Everyone who was surveyed had very helpful suggestions for future RSEP participants. One former student commented, "Enjoy each day, ask a lot of questions and make it for yourself what you want it to be." The overwhelming response was to be flexible and to keep an open mind.

Once again the suggestions for future RSEP students is time and budget planning. Be sure that your finances allow you to be in a rural area so far away from your university. By budgeting, one will be able to maintain their car if anything were to go wrong. Perhaps the most profound recommendations came from a former traditional student. They are:

> Respect the people. Respect the land. Leave expectations and prejudices at the reservation boundary and enter with an open mind and a heart willing to be taught by an ancient people. Enter your position as a humble student, not only of your academic regimen but also of a people who have endured, with pride and honor, for centuries in a harsh environment. Finally, resist the temptation to leave the reservation every weekend to rejoin the frenetic pace of the outside world. Learn to find peace in a child's tiny hand in yours, the tinkle of a sheep bell and the patient smile of a grandmother.

Conclusion

This paper discussed several challenges traditional NAU students faced as they lived and worked on the Navajo Reservation. In addition, this paper also shared the personal adaptation techniques the participants used in order to have a successful experience. We feel projects such as RSEP should become more prevalent within the nation in order to increase cultural awareness and diversity. In today's society it is important for teachers to be aware and sensitive to cultural issues. Through the RSEP, future teachers experience cultural diversity first hand. Thus, we learn the importance of overcoming barriers. The challenges that diversity brings can enhance the classroom. By learning to accept diversity in a positive manner we will be better educated for the future.

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